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A dress for Kathleen

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Journey

Friday 15th December 1939, William Clark & Sons, Upperlands

By the end of the day Kathleen's fingers ached. The older girls said her hands would toughen up to it eventually, but they'd been saying that since August. There'd been so many invoices to type she'd not noticed the daylight fading outside the office window. 'Quick as you can, girls,' Mr Kenning said each time he emerged from his office. 'The sooner they're away the sooner the remittance comes in.' Then his phone would ring and he'd scuttle back to his desk, ready to take another order. The last post was gone an hour ago, but still they worked. 'I want the decks cleared before we finish,' Mr Kenning said. 'Next week will be even busier.' It was the war, of course, and the blackout rules, that had the customers desperate. Yards and yards of 36 inch black ARP cloth needing dispatched at once the length and breadth of the country. It was always wanted *at once*. The military orders took priority, but there were countless smaller ones as well. Ladies in Belfast more accustomed to ordering finest dress linen were writing to Clarks for their blackout fabric.

At last Mr Kenning said they could finish up. He went around the office checking the windows – not that they'd been opened on a day like today – and opened the wee door of the stove to bank the embers.

'I suppose youse are off dancing the night, girls?' one of the older women joked as they buttoned themselves into their coats and burred their scarves around their necks. It was a bleak, wet night, and all anyone wanted was to be home with a plate of food in front of them and a hot water bottle warming their bed. There was a Grand Carnival Dance happening in Kilrea Town Hall on Wednesday, but she wouldn't be going. Kathleen was too young for dances. Sometimes, when she walked into Kilrea with her friends Lily and Kate on summer evenings, she would see the older boys and girls dressed to the nines and knocking around outside the Mercers Arms or the Orange Hall until the music started, or waiting for the bus to Ballymoney if one of the famous bands was playing there. The three friends wondered how they might persuade their parents to let them go when they were a bit older. Notions of dancing were far from Kathleen's mind tonight. She would walk into Kilrea tomorrow to buy Christmas treats for her wee brothers and sisters, but for now her thoughts were on home. Most of the other girls went on ahead as she got the carbide lamp on her bicycle lit. The glass was loose, and she had to twist it so that the black paper shade was in the right place. Daddy had warned her to make sure of it. The newspapers were full of cyclists being up before the judge for breaching the blackout laws.

The rain had stopped, thank goodness, but the lane from the office down to the main gate was heavy going, carpeted with wet leaves from the sycamores that lined the way. As she got further along the sycamores were succeeded by Scots firs. Her lamp cast a tight circle of light on the ground just ahead of her front wheel and gave little help in avoiding the pinecones that studded the lane. In daylight hours it was full of birdsong – the melodies of blackbirds and thrushes up near the office, and the stern cawing of the rooks from the dark thatch of the fir trees. Past eight o'clock on a December evening there was no sound but the sodden hiss of her cycle tyres and an answering whisper of the breeze in the treetops.

The path descended to the gate and Kathleen freewheeled, saving her energy for the six-mile journey home. She didn't stop at the gate, sweeping to the left onto the Kilrea road. There

were a few houses round about, but she couldn't see them in the absolute dark of the blackout. All she had was the trembling pool of light from her carbide lamp. As long as she could see it shining on the black gleam of wet tarmac in front of her she'd know she was on the road and not in the ditch.

The first bit of the road out of Upperlands was level. Later on there'd be steep ups and downs as it ribboned its way over the hills, and then the last blissful downhill stretch towards Drumagarner. Kathleen peddled harder as the road began to rise. She'd wrapped her muffler up over her mouth and nose and could smell the wool, warm and damp now with her breath. That was the great thing about cycling. As long as you were well happed up you'd be as snug as a bug. She crested the first hill and let the cycle freewheel as she came down the other side. The road levelled again and she began pedalling. She must be nearly at the Cross Keys by now.



Heaven is our home

Every family has shadow people, the ones who slipped out of the story too soon, leaving a blank space where they should have been. In my father's family that person was his sister Kathleen, who died after falling from her bicycle on her way home from work in December 1939, just a few weeks short of her fifteenth birthday. In the darkness of the blackout she didn't see a local farmer, Robert McCahon, walking on the road between Upperlands and his home at Killygullib. Perhaps she swerved at the last minute – he reported feeling something touching his right hand and then hearing a crash. The fall knocked her unconscious, and she

was bleeding from a cut above her left eye. When McCahon lifted her to the side of the road she vomited. There was a little shop nearby at the Cross Keys, and the shopkeeper, Lily Canning, had a car. She drove Kathleen to Dr Johnston's house in Swatragh, and he in turn took her to the infirmary in Magherafelt. It was after midnight when she was admitted. She died in the early hours of Sunday morning without regaining consciousness.

I knew about Kathleen from visits to my grandparents in Kilrea. Not that she was talked about – not at all. But she was buried in the graveyard of Kilrea Parish Church, just a short walk up the hill from my grandparents' house. If our visits fell on a summer Sunday the Kilrea cousins would take my brother and me for a walk. The attractions were limited: a tiny play-park tucked away beside the primary school, a gnarled fairy thorn on Church Street, kept upright by rusted iron struts, and Kathleen's grave.

The plot was marked with a modest cross and surrounded by large white pebbles of the sort you might pick up on the beach at White Park Bay thirty-odd miles away on the north Antrim coast. Kathleen was buried beside her baby sister, Ruth. Poor Ruth is hidden even further in the shadows than Kathleen. Born in 1930, the fourth of my grandparents' children, she lived only fourteen days. Her death certificate records the cause of death as 'congenital debility'. She was born weak, in other words, and in the days before the NHS and Special Care Baby Units the odds were against her.

I was intrigued by death, as children often are, although I had little direct experience of it. I was blessed with a full quartet of long-lived grandparents. Kathleen challenged my understanding of time and family. Could I call her my aunt when she had died twenty-five years before I was even born? My own family unit was tidy and compact - Mum, Dad, my brother and me – but both my parents had a sprawling, fecund heritage where generations of women gave twenty or thirty years of their lives to pregnancy, birth and childrearing. Dad was one of eleven children, Mum one of eight. By the time my maternal grandfather was born his oldest brother had already emigrated from Ireland to America. They never met. The idea of being cut off from a sibling by years and distance was unimaginable.

If you go to Kilrea Parish Church now you'll not find the simple grave with the white stones around it. After my grandparents died and were buried in the same plot a wide new grave-surround was installed – polished black granite filled with quartz chips. It's in a beautiful spot, as graves go, shaded by a venerable copper beech.

In the years since then the grave has filled up as Kathleen, Ruth and their parents were joined by two more of the children – Anna and Jack – both of whom managed the full span of years their sisters never saw. The black granite headstone has grown crowded with names. Engraved at its base, partly hidden by grave pots and arrangements of artificial flowers, are the words HEAVEN IS OUR HOME.

Writers like to impose pattern onto the muddle of experience, to shape the arbitrary into a narrative arc. I wanted to do something different for Kathleen. What if, instead of writing about her, I made a gift for her? A way of honouring the short time she had, and mourning the many years she never saw. I imagined a different future for her, one where her supervisor had let her leave work fifteen minutes earlier or made her stay ten minutes later that wet December evening in 1939. Or where Robert McCahon had been delayed in Upperlands for another half an hour. A future where that quiet, disastrous collision at the Cross Keys had never happened, and Kathleen had cycled on safely back to Drumagarner, to the tiny, crowded house and a table piled high with praties fresh from the pot. In that future she'd have celebrated her twenty-first birthday by having a dress made. It would not have been

extravagant – simple cotton, no doubt, but pretty enough to wear to a dance. And that is how *A dress for Kathleen* began. I would make the dress for her. I would tell her story in stitch.

Drumagarner gatehouse

After a few wrong turns I find the lane that lead to Drumagarner gatehouse. Dad's in the passenger seat, looking out the window. We pass a turn-off to the left where a picture-book white cottage sits. There are, literally, roses round the door. The rural charm is only slightly diminished by a warehouse looming in the background. 'That was Rosie Diamond's cottage,' Dad says. Rosie was the local woman called upon to deliver babies and lay out the dead. Nobody lives there now, but it's been restored and furnished with vintage fixtures and fittings. After another quarter mile we enter a stretch shaded by trees. 'I think it's here somewhere,' Dad says, gesturing to the right. The lane widens and I pull in. Still in the car, I peer into a tangle of willow trees. I can just make out a shape that's familiar to me from the one old photograph of the gatehouse. This is the house where my dad and his ten brothers and sisters were born. The house where baby Ruth died in the bleak autumn of 1930. The house Kathleen's body was returned to the night before her funeral.

Drumagarner gatehouse belonged to the London Midland and Scottish Railway, and was one of a series of gatehouses dotted along the Derry Central railway line. My grandparents moved into the house in the early 1920s after my grandfather got a job with the LMS. It was a single-story dwelling with an outer shell of corrugated tin. The walls were thin, and the plastered interior was often slippery with damp. There were three small rooms – the middle one with a hearth – and a porch that served as a kitchen of sorts, although all the cooking was done over the open fire. There was a tiny window in the porch so that my grandmother could keep an eye on the railway line as she peeled potatoes or washed the dishes. Water was fetched from a spring at the edge of a nearby field, and of course there was no electricity. To a landless labourer like my grandfather it must have felt like quite a prize. The gatehouse was abandoned in the 1980s when its last tenant, an elderly bachelor, died. As is the way in country areas the building was not demolished but simply left to its own devices.



Gatehouse in the 1940s

Today Dad and I make our careful way over the rough ground to see what's left of it. Surprisingly, given that it was such a gimcrack structure, it's pretty much intact. There's broken glass in the windows and the front door has gone. A tree has taken root close to one of the windows, and we have to manoeuvre round it to peer inside. The floor sags like wet cardboard, revealing layers of decomposing linoleum. A collapsed bed frame lies in the corner. 'There used to be two big beds in each bedroom', he says. 'You could fit three people in the beds. My father and us boys slept in one room, and my mother and the girls in the other.' Looking now at the tiny room I can see that once those two beds were in there wouldn't have been space for anything else. 'My mother and father never slept in the same bed,' Dad continues. 'But I suppose they must have got together sometimes, given that they produced eleven of us.'

What with the state of the floor we decide it's not safe to go inside the gatehouse. Dad finds a loose section of window frame and starts to prise it off. I ask him what he's up to. 'A souvenir of the ancestral home,' he says. 'I'll paint it with white emulsion and mount it on a bit of board.' Dad has a fixation about creating these kinds of mementoes. He loves putting plaques on things.



Gatehouse in 2018

Rural neighbourhoods are intertwined in a way that I, as a lifelong city-dweller, find hard to comprehend. Further up the lane from Rosie Diamond there were the Agnews, a pious but cheerful farming family who sang Presbyterian hymns to their cows as they milked them. Lily Agnew was a particular friend of Kathleen's. The message on her funeral wreath called Kathleen her 'dear chum'. And then there were the McIlDowneys. A 'pad' or path ran through the moss towards their place, which combined farmhouse, shop and pub. The children would often be sent to buy a pound of butter or cheese from Susan McIlDowney.

In 1948 the family left the gatehouse. New public housing had been built in Kilrea, and they were given a tenancy in one of the new houses. Compared to the gatehouse it was a palace. It had a front and back parlour, a kitchen, four bedrooms and a bathroom. The eldest boy was

away and married, and three of the older children were working, so the family was more prosperous than it had ever been. There was money enough to buy new furniture for the house – a sofa and easy chairs, a sideboard and china cabinet. For the first time in her life my granny would have a cooker. As they prepared to leave the gatehouse they brought out all the old pine furniture and every other remnant of their old life. They built it into a pile and set a match to it, then stood and watched it burn until there was nothing left but ashes.

Webs

This part of mid-Ulster does not announce its beauty like other parts of Northern Ireland. It's a modest landscape under an epic sky. Viewed in passing from the motorway it's flat, but when you travel along the smaller roads connecting the villages and towns you notice the gentle rise and fall of the land, like the most sedate of rollercoasters. Travelling from Kilrea to Upperlands there are occasional glimpses of the Sperrin mountain range on the distant horizon. From this perspective the Sperrins are a low, broad mass. There are no showstopper peaks, nothing to distinguish one mountain from the next. These days the area is enjoyed by walkers, despoiled by quarry companies and even – in a spirit of misplaced optimism – mined for gold. In Kathleen's time it was terra incognita to most people: home to a few hardy hill-farmers, and the ideal spot to distil poitín – an illicit and blindingly strong liquor. When Kathleen's father was a B-Special in the early 20s one of his jobs was to raid poitín stills. The only people who visited the Sperrins for leisure were well-to-do families like the Clarks – the owners of William Clark & Sons where Kathleen worked - who would load up their cars with picnics and shotguns for late-summer grouse-shooting excursions.

The Clark family had been involved in the linen business since the early 1700s, when John Clark, grandson of Scottish settlers, began to trade in the fabric in a small way. Over the next two hundred years business flourished as linen production became industrialised, and the family's fortunes blossomed likewise. The first buildings of the 'works' were built beside the narrow, fast moving Clady River where conditions were right for water-powered equipment. At that time there was no Upperlands village. The area surrounding the works was a sparsely populated townland, but over the decades that changed. Modest dwellings were built for the linen workers, and a series of splendid residences for the several branches of the Clark family. Clark menfolk were expected to join the family business whether they liked it or not. 'Old' Harry Clark – who turned seventy the year after Kathleen died – had tried to break free by running away to sea when he was fifteen, only to be tracked down and retrieved by his father. His son, 'Young' Harry, took over the management of the works in 1925.

Upperlands is in some ways a hidden village. You could drive through it and not realize that it's anything more than a few buildings scattered along the road. There's no church or pub, and the nearest primary school is over half a mile away on the road to Kilrea. The 1911 census showed a population of 358, and by 2001 this had increased to 535, but you'd never guess it unless you take the time to stop and explore.

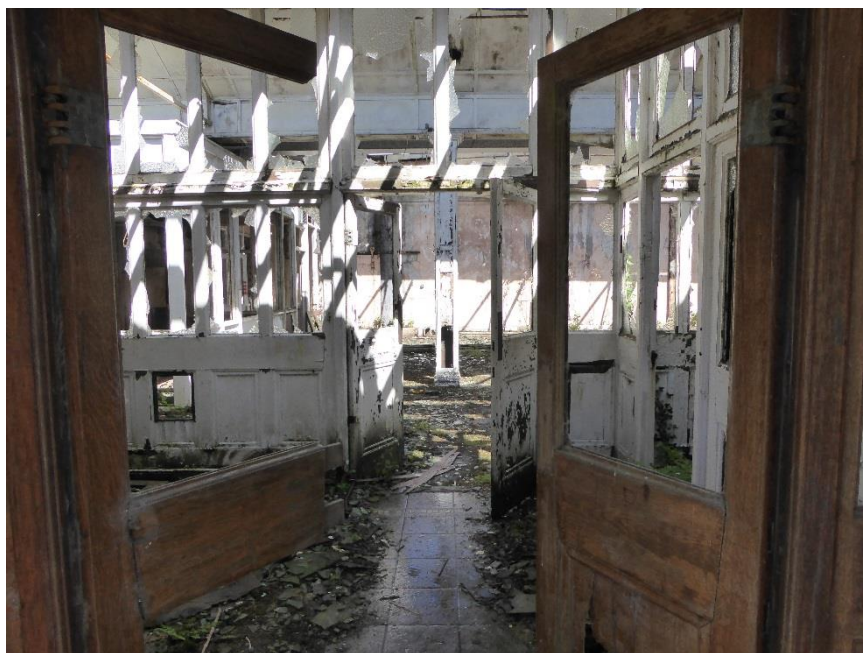
My first visit is on a Sunday afternoon. I park beside the Clady River, its water golden brown, drawing its colour from the peat bogs that blanket the land around here. The linen works is scattered around the village, a mix of old, new and derelict. There are two eighteenth-century stone buildings beside the car park – one has been restored as a visitor centre, and the other is a beetling house, where the woven fabric is pounded to give it the glossy appearance required for rich damask linen.

Across the road from the visitor centre, the gateway to William Clark & Sons opens into a lane shadowed on either side by Scots firs. Up above the rooks caw and squawk. As I walk further along the lane the pines give way to broadleaf trees, and the birdsong changes to the melodies and chirrups of blackbirds and robins. After a few minutes I come to a fork in the lane. The left hand path leads downhill to the modern works, where most of the company's production now takes place. Being a Sunday, it's closed up behind a locked gate. The right hand path leads up to a derelict building that once housed the office. This was where Kathleen worked. The date above the ruined door says 1929. This was an elegant Art Deco building in its time, painted powder blue, with the windowsills and slender pilasters picked out in air force blue. I tiptoe in, broken glass crunching under my feet. In Kathleen's day it must have been a modern and covetable workplace. The office then was equipped with a telephone, a dictograph and a typewriter, and the room was bright with electric and natural light. Orders were written by hand into huge ledgers that sat on high, sloped desks, and the wages books were similarly majestic in scale. Kathleen's death certificate gives her occupation as 'Typist' – a job that, for a girl from Kathleen's background, was quite prestigious. In the finely nuanced class structure of rural Northern Ireland, to be an office worker was considered superior to most other jobs available to young women. It was better than being a shop assistant, and a world above the female factory workers, regardless of how skilled they might be.

All that remains of the office interior now is a tiled floor and the shattered wooden framework that once formed a partition between the office itself and the equally derelict lapping room. The lapping room was where the finished linen was folded (or lapped) before going to market. Someone has spray-painted the statement *No Pope* on one of the walls.



It's hard to know what the working atmosphere in the office might have been. No doubt the manager, Mr Kenning, expected efficiency and deference, but it was almost certainly more relaxed than it had been a century earlier, when the rules for clerical staff forbade them from talking during business hours, or 'disporting themselves in raiment of bright colours'. Something of that unforgiving spirit can be seen in Old Harry Clark's diaries. On an entry from 1935 recalling how a careless worker had ruined fine dress linen worth £600, Old Harry notes, 'This man should never be employed in Upperlands again!' And in his account of the great lappers' strike of 1938 he notes, with satisfaction, 'We used this opportunity to reorganise the whole lapping room, and as a result we were able to do without a great many of the strikers, who never got back to work again.'



Clark offices in Upperlands 2018

Ironically, given those stern edicts against staff wearing bright clothes, much of the language of linen is vibrant with colour and beauty. Old Harry's diaries are full of it. He talks constantly of webs – how many were made, how many sold. A web is the whole piece of linen cloth as it comes off the loom, and in Old Harry's time would have been about 100 yards long. He refers to the brown room, where loomstate linen was stored ahead of being bleached and finished, and the black dye house, where the linen was dyed. A reliable water supply was essential to the linen-making process, and in dry years he would worry over the water levels in the green race – the fast-moving stream beside the bleach green. I love the idea that the company can be described in colours.

In the days and weeks following the outbreak of war on 3rd September 1939, Old Harry makes careful note of events. Ships were sunk by the Germans and taxes were raised. Two of his sons joined the armed services. On September 16th he records that the son of a Clark's employee was killed when his ship, the HMS Courageous, was torpedoed. Reading the typescript of the diary in the Public Record Office in Belfast I turn to December, wondering what mention he'll make of Kathleen's death. He writes about the King returning to London after inspecting troops in France, and his son, Young Harry, returning from a trip to Scotland before Christmas. But there's nothing about Kathleen. I feel strangely hurt.

At least William Clark and his wife, Old Harry's son and daughter-in-law, sent a wreath to the funeral, as did the managers and office staff. At the inquest into Kathleen's death Mr Kenning

‘spoke of the great loss caused by the death of the deceased, and expressed the sympathy of his directors with the bereaved parents’.



I've been back to Upperlands many times since that first visit. I love the walk up the lane to the old office building, the way the bird-music shifts from the rooks to the songbirds. Up beyond to old office is a series of dams, constructed to supply the works with power and water. In Kathleen's time these working dams doubled-up as a playground for the Clark children – boating in the summer, ice-skating when the water froze in the winter. These days, although still part of the company's property, there's a sense that the dams belong to the community. Teenage lads fish, and dog walkers enjoy the circuit around the manmade lakes. Local volunteers run the visitor centre as a labour of love. One of them is a descendant of Robert McCahon, the Ballygullib farmer who Kathleen swerved to avoid on that December night in 1939. In this part of the country land and family roots hold people fast. Like webs.

Reading a dress

It's hard to find the right words to explain how *A dress for Kathleen* developed. Even the word 'developed' isn't quite right, with its implication of growth and progress. I prefer Keats' notion of negative capability – of openly and patiently letting random fragments dwell in the imagination, trusting that they will eventually coalesce. In retrospect I can see how my interest in textile crafts – crochet, embroidery, spinning and felting – made me realize that the act of making is a place where stories are told. Craft requires concentration and attention to detail – it can't be done mindlessly. It's absorbing, but at the same time seems to open up a breathing space in the mind where ideas come out to play almost unnoticed.

Ironically I'd taken up those crafts as a counterbalance to my work as a writer. Writing is a strangely disembodied activity – the effortless tapping on the keyboard, the long hours spent inside our own minds. Even the end product, in these days of ebooks and online publishing, often has no physical form. Textile craft speaks to the human need to *make* – even if in my case all I made were a few shapeless crocheted hats and more scarves than a person could ever want. Anything we make with our own hands carries with it a story. The notion of making for the pleasure of it would have been alien to my grandmother. She stitched from necessity, unpicking cloth flour sacks, bleaching them to remove the manufacturer's logo, then reassembling them into sheets and pillowcases. Kathleen spent her working days processing orders for the finest napery and bed linen, then went home to sleep on the flour sack sheets her mother had made.

My grandmother did the basic darning and mending of clothes expected of any housewife of the period, but anything more ambitious was a job for Tilly Moore, the dressmaker who lived further up the lane. People would come from Kilrea to get Tilly to 'turn' their good winter coats – that is, unpick the coat at the seams, turn the worn side of the fabric to the inside, and stitch it all together again so that another few years wear could be got out of it.

The idea of narrative textiles is nothing new – the anonymous needlewomen who made the Bayeux Tapestry were telling a story in stitch nearly a thousand years ago. In the domestic sphere, this kind of storytelling has continued quietly for hundreds of years, often finding expression in quilts. I like to imagine it may also manifest itself in other, more secret stitching – hidden in the seams and linings of garments. I've been particularly inspired by the work of artists Tamar Stone, Rosalind Wyatt and Paddy Hartley who literally write in stitch, embellishing garments with words and printed images. In Hartley's *Project Façade*, for example, he embroiders vintage First World War uniforms with extracts from injured servicemen's medical records, and appliques the garments with fabric facsimiles of archival photographs.

The perfect dress on which to tell Kathleen's story would be one that she had worn – but not a scrap remains of anything she owned. The only item I have is a photograph of her. It's a close-up. Not quite a formal studio portrait, but not a snapshot either. The back-drop looks like a crumpled piece of cloth. She's wearing a tweed jacket and a blouse with a white collar. At a guess I'd say this was taken at school the year she left, when she was fourteen. There are several copies of this photo floating around the family. It's actually printed on a postcard, and I wonder was this part of the undertaker's service – hearse, horses and a bundle of memento postcards to share with the family circle.

Without a dress that had actually belonged to Kathleen, I had to find an alternative. I scoured Ebay for vintage dresses from the era – around 1946, say, when she'd have turned twenty-one. There wasn't much available, and nothing that looked right for a working class girl from rural Northern Ireland. Even if there had been, I was terrified at the prospect of embellishing a precious garment that had survived intact for

seventy-odd years. Every artist understands the paralysing effect of the blank page or canvas. How much more paralysing is a canvas already rich with someone else's work? If every garment is a text in itself, then stitching Kathleen's story onto someone else's garment would be almost parasitical. And also – perhaps masochistically – it seemed to be there would not be enough labour in my task. I didn't want to take a short cut.

So I decided to make the dress myself, setting some ground rules. I would use a genuine dressmaking pattern from the period, and I would use fabric that could be linked – even in the most tenuous way – to Kathleen's world. The pattern itself didn't present much of a challenge, as Ebay has a plentiful supply of originals for sale. The war and post-war years were a golden age for home dressmaking, with women advised that it was their patriotic duty to look pretty *and* be economical housekeepers. *The Vogue Book of Smart Dressmaking*, with its cover promise to explain 'the professional method which saves coupons', advised that 'the well-dressed woman is the practical one'. I found a 'Style' pattern, original price 1/6 (one shilling and sixpence) for a simple button-through day dress. It arrived in a disintegrating outer envelope. Everything about it spoke of frugality. It required only three yards of fabric. The instructions were tightly printed on a sheet of paper that was about the size of a foolscap page. Unlike modern dressmaking patterns, the tissue paper pattern pieces were unprinted – presumably to save ink – and the letters identifying them had been added with a hole-punch, as had the marks for darts and other fitting details. Some earlier owner had helpfully written the piece names on in pencil: bodice back, skirt back.

The fabric, miraculously, came from William Clark & Sons – but it's brand new, not vintage. The firm has survived the seismic changes that have decimated domestic textile production over the last number of decades, but the era when fine dress linens were woven in Upperlands is long past. They now specialise in 'finishing' linen, particularly the sort of fabric that is used for high-end curtains, cushions and upholstery. It's typically made with heavier threads than dress linen and is more loosely woven. That makes it stiff, and not the sort of material you'd normally use for a garment. Nonetheless, it felt right that Kathleen's dress should be made from linen that came from the very place she'd worked. Clarks don't normally sell directly to the public, but the Creative Director, Duncan Neil, listened sympathetically to my explanation when I arrived unannounced at the factory. He helped me choose a plain ivory linen: it's simplicity and innocence seemed fitting for the young girl Kathleen had been.

Before cutting into my precious linen I made a practice version of the dress in gauzy muslin. This is known in dressmaking as a *toile*, from the French word for tissue. The purpose of the *toile* is usually to check for fit – it's a trial-run garment made with cheap fabric. In my case I was sewing it to refresh my rusty dressmaking skills, and make the construction mistakes I didn't dare make once I was working on the linen. A muslin *toile* is a sad and beautiful thing – a dress that will never be worn, fragile and ethereal.

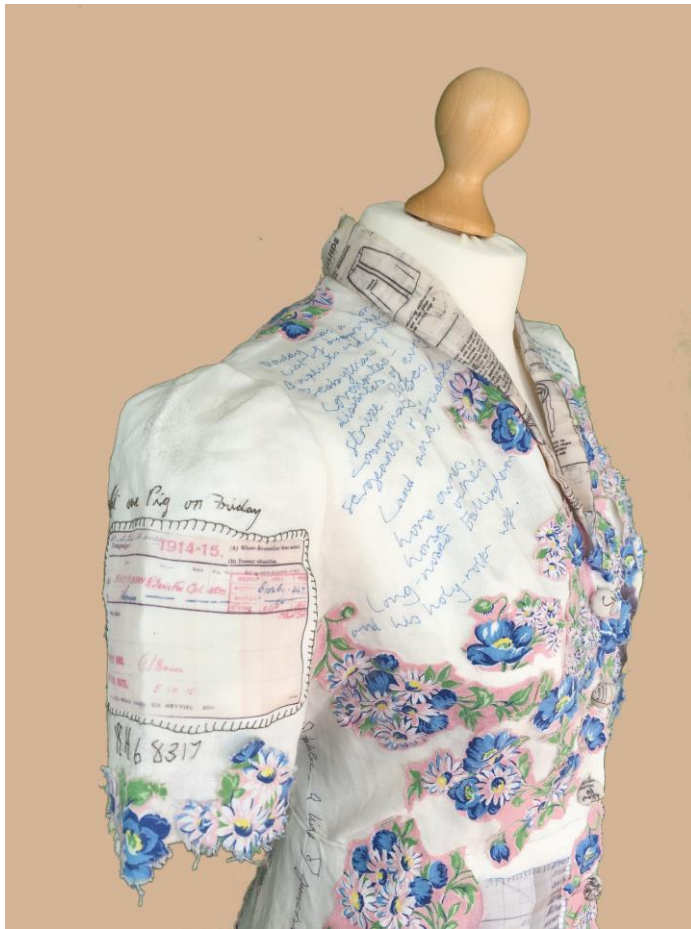
The time spent working on the *toile* and then the dress proper gave me time to think about how I would 'write' the story on the fabric, and what words I would use. I wanted to capture a sense of the living girl – excited to have got a start in a decent job with good prospects; proud to be contributing to the family finances; wondering and worrying what the war would mean; dreaming of a future with dances and new clothes. I wanted my imagined Kathleen to be alert to the world around her – its smells and colours and tastes. So I began to write little fictional fragments, imagining Kathleen's journey to and from work that summer of 1939. I unearthed Clark's order books at the Public Record Office – enormous ledgers that had to be wheeled to me on a trolley – and

learnt the language of linen: black buckram, slate Holland, shrunk duck, dove pocketing, bleached mercerised linen suiting. The pages from December 1939 are full of orders for blackout cloth. The military convalescent depot at the New Savoy Hotel in Bangor wants 700 yards, Palace Barracks in Holywood wants 500 yards, and St Patrick's Barracks in Ballymena wants 900 yards. Every order is prefaced with the words *At Once*.

It's well known that the period of late childhood and early adulthood is one of intense impressionability. These are the years when we absorb the experiences that will become our most vivid memories. I thought about the impact of the new words and worlds opened up to Kathleen in those order books, and how it might feed her imagination.

To equip myself with the skills of writing in stitch I signed up for a residential course run by Rosalind Wyatt. She's a calligrapher by training, and has profound knowledge of the way handwriting is constructed. Her skill with a needle means she can replicate handwritten words in stitch, catching loops of thread with barely visible couching stitches. Her work is not simply decorative. It's about the creating an intimate dialogue between words and textiles.

The only example of handwriting I had to work with was an old pocket notebook belonging to my grandfather. It's 16cm x 10cm, with a dark red cover and lined pages. He used it to take note of the hours he'd worked for the LMS, and other details of his job – old railway sleepers sent to Belfast; wagons of screening delivered to Garvagh Station; Mrs Kelso's goat escaping onto the line. The first entry is 20th March 1942, just over three years after Kathleen's death. He writes in a casual copperplate, sometimes copying out individual words – *accommodation, permission* - as if to check the spelling, and he starts nearly every noun with an upper case letter. Under Rosalind's careful tutelage I selected a few snippets that seemed to convey his personality: *I bought a pair of Waring Boots at 35 Shillings; I Bought one Pig on Friday; No. of my Bicycle RH68317*. I decided to use a deep khaki coloured thread for his words, as a nod to his time in the army during the First World War.



When it came to stitching Kathleen's words – which were, of course, a product of my imagination – I chose a thread that was as close as I could find to the blue of the flax flower. I wrote them out by hand, doing my best to change my twenty-first century scrawl to something closer to the neat cursive script Kathleen would have learnt at the Mercers' School in Kilrea.

There was one more voice I wanted to give space to on the dress – Kathleen's mother. My grandmother was a quiet woman who rarely left the house. My memories of her were of a kindly, silent woman, dressed always in a dark skirt and a white blouse with a brooch at the neck. She retained a beautiful complexion all her eighty-two years. On our family visits to Kilrea she would busy herself in preparing tea, sandwiches and buns, not taking anything herself until the guests were fed and watered. It was only as I worked on *A dress for Kathleen* that I really considered the sadness running through her life. She had buried two daughters. Her husband's bad moods and fixations had driven several of the surviving children away. A cousin told me that Granny always blamed my grandfather for Kathleen's death, because he had insisted she take up the job at Clarks. I thought of their sixty years of marriage, and the bitterness and sorrow buried in their silences. It put me in mind of seams of coal or precious ore, hidden from sight beneath the surface. The word 'seam' led me back to fabric, and the dress. I took some dictionary definitions – *a meeting of fabric, a line of junction, a suture, a crack, the mark of a cut* – and attributed them to my grandmother. I imagined more words for her: *A furrow planted with pain. A hidden thing, dark and precious, held fast in the earth. Secrets are stitched in the seams.* I wanted the writing to be in a different hand, so asked my friend Maria – a dedicated supporter of the *A dress for Kathleen* project – to write the words out

for me. Finally, I chose a thread in deep maroon, which seems to me like a mournful colour, and stitched the words along one of the seam-lines of the dress.

Writing in stitch is a laborious, time-consuming task. Words mean so much more to me when I write them stitch-by-stitch. They become a physical thing as well as a symbol or signifier, so that when I read a word I see both the thing it means and understand its* material presence. I'm used to rattling out words on a keyboard – I'm a trained typist, so I'm quick – and that's great for catching thoughts in flight. But sewing words brings about a different relationship with them. The dress I'm stitching on becomes as familiar as a comfort blanket. It's in my hands every day, and I come to know how the fabric responds, how best to work with it. There's a sense of connection – communion, almost – that doesn't happen when writing with any other media.

In addition to the words, the dress is embellished with various images: old family photographs, a picture of the gatehouse, my grandfather's army record, pages from Clarks' order book. Using printable fabric sheets that can be run through an inkjet printer, I've reproduced these images on silk, and appliquéd them onto the dress. The back skirt of the dress has a map of the district stitched on it, based on an Ordnance Survey map from 1900. Finally, the whole garment is embellished with appliquéd scraps of vintage floral cotton-linen fabric – the sort of fabric Kathleen might have had made into a dress.

One of the things I love about telling a story in the form of a dress is that there's no dramatic arc. The reader absorbs the story in their own way, choosing what to read and in whatever order they please. They might not notice some parts, or misunderstand others. There's no beginning, and no end.



So the story is made of linen. It's compact and unassuming, like the young woman it was made to fit, a young woman with the slim waist and narrow back of her wartime generation. It's embellished with scraps and fragments – words, pictures, maps and absences. There are loose threads and frayed hems, because Kathleen's was an unfinished story. I once read that when a person dies young they cast a shadow across all the years they should have lived, and it's true that the pain of Kathleen's death is still felt – albeit faintly – within the family. But *A dress for Kathleen* is not about shadows. It's about life, in all its quiet glory.

Journeys

Friday 15th December 1939, Cross Keys, Kilrea Road, Upperlands

Business attended to, McCahon lit out from Upperlands to Killygullib. The night was wet and dark, and he was glad of the warm wash of stout in his veins. He heard something, felt something, at the same moment. A touch on his hand. A whisper in the rain. Then a clatter of falling. There was a spill of light on the road. He felt his way to it and found the girl tangled in her cycle. 'Are you all right, wee love?' he said, but she didn't speak. He lifted her and she vomited. He laid her at the side of the road. Moved the cycle so that the lamp shone on her. There was blood on her face. He stood in a state looking up and down the road. Upperlands was two miles behind him, Kilrea an hour away on foot. He knew there were houses hereabout, but he'd never find them in the blackout. When he heard the hiss of tyres on the road he nearly cried. 'Houl on there,' he shouted to the cyclist. 'There's a girl hurt here.'

Saturday 16th December 1939, Magherafelt & Drumagarner

Her father found her in Magherafelt Infirmary in the wee hours. He'd gone to Jimmy Begley's when Bertie had run into the house with word of an accident. Jimmy borrowed a car and they drove to Upperlands first, then to Dr. Johnston's surgery in Swatragh. Mrs Johnston said Kathleen had been brought there, but her husband said she needed the hospital. So the pair of them drove on to Magherafelt.

It was well towards morning, still dark though, when Jimmy Begley brought word to Kathleen's mother. 'She's young and strong,' he said. 'Sure there's manys a one gets a nap on the cranny and they're right as rain after.' The wee ones slept, but Bertie and Doreen sat up with their mother. Turf crackled in the hearth.

Sunday 17th December 1939, Kilrea

Her father didn't dare bring the news home. He was back in Kilrea by Sunday lunchtime. Knocked on the door at the Rectory. Went to Cromie's and made the arrangements – glass hearse, black horses. Travelled with them in the van to Magherafelt to bring Kathleen back. 'Stop here' he said, as they passed McIlldowney's on the way home. 'You'll not get a drink today,' Cromie said, thinking he'd forgotten what day of the week it was. But Peter McIlldowney took pity. Opened a quiet bottle. There was no law broken if money didn't change hands.

Monday 18th December 1939, Drumnagarner Gatehouse

It was after midnight when they got Kathleen home. Her mother wouldn't look at him. Cromie and his lad carried the coffin into the girls' bedroom. Mrs Agnew wet the tea, coaxed the sleepless children to eat slivers of fadge. Rosie Diamond helped wash Kathleen and dress her, as she had the day she was born.

Heather Richardson, 19th October 2018.